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ABSTRACT

In February 2001 the Center for Civic Education conducted the first survey of alumni from the "We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution" program. Three Hundred forty-one alumni, who were eligible to vote in November 2000, participated. Voting and other forms of political engagement formed the core of the study. Since respondents were self selected, findings should be considered suggestive rather than generalizable to all alumni. Alumni were compared with a national probability study from the 2000 National Election Studies (NES) of young people in the same age group of 18- to 30-year-olds and also with over 260,000 college freshmen. This report documents the survey results, which indicate that the alumni surveyed are better informed and participate at higher rates than their peers. Additionally, data suggest that effective civic education may increase voter turnout among youth. (Survey is appended.) (BT)

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Report on Voting and Political Participation of "We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution" Alumni

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May 2001

SO 032 980

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Voting and Political Participation of
We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution Alumni
Executive Summary 2001

In February 2001 the Center conducted the first survey of alumni from the **We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution** program. Altogether, 341 alumni who were eligible to vote in November 2000 responded. Voting and other forms of political engagement formed the core of this study. Due to self-selection on the parts of the respondents, these findings should be considered as suggestive rather than generalizable to all **We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution** alumni. The study lays the groundwork for a longitudinal study of alumni to begin in 2002.

We the People... alumni were compared with a national probability study from the *2000 National Election Studies* (NES) of young people in the same age group of 18- to 30-year-olds. Alumni were also compared with over 260,000 American college freshmen (*The American Freshman: National Norms For Fall 1999*). Key findings include:

- 82% of alumni reported voting in November 2000, in contrast to 48% of those surveyed in the NES study
- 77% of alumni said they had voted in all previous elections
- 60% of alumni were very interested in national politics and national affairs
- 46% of alumni read the newspaper often and 60% paid a great deal of attention to stories on politics and public issues, whereas 35% of NES respondents had not read a daily newspaper in the past week, and 40% of NES respondents said they had not watched a national television news broadcast in the past week
- 74% of alumni held that it was essential or very important to keep up to date with political affairs in contrast to only 23% of American college freshmen
- 42% of alumni discussed national politics and affairs nearly every day or every day
- Since January of 2000, 16% of respondents had volunteered to work for a candidate running for office; 10% had made a financial campaign contribution; 33% had taken part in a protest, march or demonstration on a national or local issue; only 3% of NES respondents had taken part in any of these activities
- 34% of alumni, in contrast to 9% of NES respondents, had contacted a federal elected official or staff; 37% had contacted state or local level elected officials or their staff
- 48% of alumni thought influencing the political structure was essential or very important, while only 14% of college freshmen agreed
- 54% of alumni felt becoming a community leader was essential or very important, in contrast to 29% of college freshmen

Alumni surveyed in this study are better informed and participate at higher rates than their peers. In addition, the data suggest that effective civic education may increase voter turnout among youth. A full copy of this report may be obtained at: http://www.civiced.org/research.html. For additional information contact Suzanne Soule at (800) 350-4223 or soule@civiced.org.

Voting and Political Participation of We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution Alumni Survey Results 2001

Background

Since the inception of the **We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution** program in 1987, more than twenty-six million students and eighty-two thousand educators have participated in this innovative course of study. In 1998, the Center formed the Alumni Network in order to track and tap into this vast resource of past participants.

In February 2001, using email addresses collected from alumni, the Center conducted the first alumni survey.[1] The total number of alumni respondents eligible to vote in November 2000 was 341. This study is not a random sample; the results are suggestive rather than generalizable to the larger population of all program participants and lay the groundwork for a longitudinal study of alumni.

The focus of this study was on political participation with an emphasis on voting for two reasons. First, since the primary goal of the **We the People...** program is to promote civic competence and responsibility among the nation's elementary and secondary students, we would expect to see at least a minimal level of commitment to participating in the political process. If "citizen participation is at the heart of democracy,"[2] then voting, where citizens have political equality and a relatively easy way to make their preferences known, should increase as a result of participation in a civic education program. Second, voter turnout is abysmally low for the youngest cohorts. U.S. Census Bureau turnout figures in 1998, an off-year election, show 17% turnout for 18- to 24-year-olds. In contrast, 54% of those aged 45-64 and 60% of those 65 and over turned out in 1998. This gap dwarfs gender, race, and class differences,[3] leaving the youngest cohort at a disadvantage when it comes to ensuring responsiveness from public officials.

For a basis of comparison with **We the People...** alumni data, we have used results from the National Election Study (NES). The 2000 NES, a national probability study, took place between November and December 2000. The comparison data are from the 862 respondents interviewed by phone following the election. Young people, those born between 1970 and 1982, will be compared across both studies. These citizens were eligible to vote in November and ranged in age from 18-30. In the alumni survey, respondents tended to be younger—58% were born in 1981 and 1982—doubtless due to the alumni network's founding in 1998. NES respondents were more evenly spread, but clustered at the lower end of the age range, with 27% of respondents born between 1970 and 1972. These differences were apparent with educational attainment as the highest degree earned by 74% of alumni was a high school diploma, whereas 42% of the national sample went on to earn a BA or higher.

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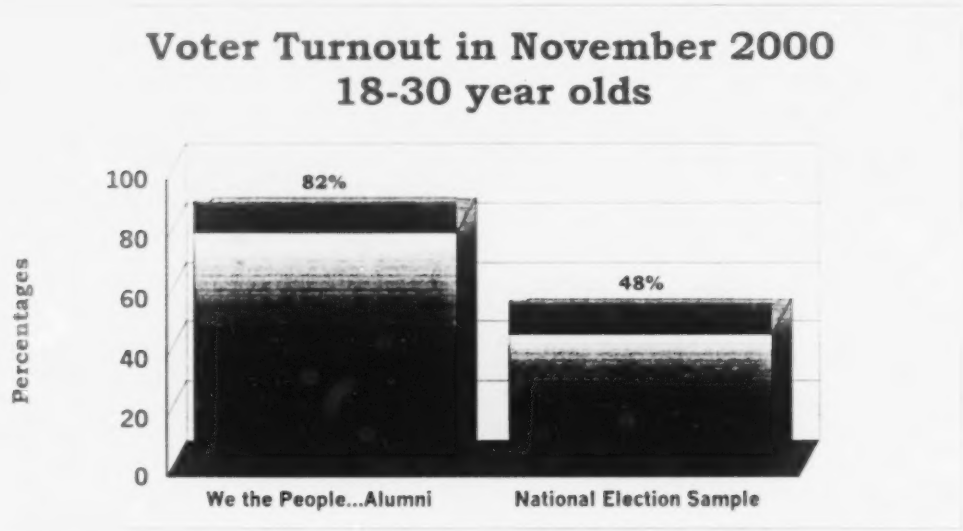
[1] Online survey. Questions are included in Appendix 1.
[2] Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995). *Voice and Equality, Civic Volunteerism in American Politics.* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), p. 1.
[3] See Putnam and Campbell, *Boston Globe*, 8-10-00, Census Bureau turnout data.

More women than men are included in both studies: 63% in the alumni study and 58% in the NES. Whites comprised 80% of alumni surveyed but only 68% in the NES. In summary, the alumni tend to be younger, less educated, predominately white and female, as opposed to the national study.[4]

Voting

Alumni reported 82% turnout in the November elections. In addition, 77% indicated that they had voted in all previous elections. This is encouraging given low turnout of the youngest cohorts. Respondents in the NES reported 48% turnout. The 34% difference suggests that effective civic education programs may increase voter turnout among youth, the least politically engaged Americans. In this study, 70.8% of alumni voted at higher rates than their peers. Among all ages surveyed in the NES (18-80+), 65.4% said they were "sure they voted" in November 2000. This is interesting but unlikely, since 101,452,315 Americans actually turned out.[5]



Many alumni wrote that participating in the **We the People...** program made them more aware that their votes counted. One wrote that the program "taught me the value of citizen participation in a representative democracy and the dangers of voter apathy. I definitely found new value in being more informed and voting." Another alumna wrote that participating "increased my awareness of the importance of citizen involvement." Another became "convinced that being involved and knowing about current events is an essential part of life."

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[4] Lower educational attainment is due to the younger age of alumni. Citizens with more schooling are more likely to participate in the political process, including voting. Of alumni surveyed here, 76% competed at the national civic education competition in Washington, DC.

[5] Social desirability increases positive response rates. Americans know what the "correct" response should be. This might be true across studies, the online alumni survey as well as the phone interviews by NES.

Interest in Politics
Only 14.1% of NES respondents reported that they were very much interested in political campaigns in 2000. A majority, 60% of the **We the People...** alumni, reported they were very interested in national politics and national affairs. An alum wrote that participating in the program "sparked intense interest that will last throughout my life; shaped my career goals." Another wrote that participation "heightened my awareness and interest in politics, both local and national. It gave me greater respect for and understanding of government."

Attention to Media
Alumni are not only more interested, but are better informed than their peers. Only 3.2% of alumni reported that they never watched national news broadcasts on television; 37% said they watched news on television a "great deal." Nearly half of **We the People...** alumni (46%) reported reading a newspaper "a great deal," and 60% reported that they pay "a great deal" of "attention to stories on national and world politics and public issues." When asked if they paid attention to websites that focus on national and international politics and public issues, over half of alumni (69%) responded that they paid some or a great deal of attention to websites that focus on these issues. In contrast, 40% of NES respondents said they had not watched a national news broadcast on TV in the past week. Over one third (35%) reported that they had not read a daily newspaper in the past week.

Discussion of Politics
In addition to being better informed, alumni discuss politics more often than their peers. Only 1.5% of alumni report that they never discuss national politics and national affairs with others, whereas 14.4% of NES respondents never discussed politics with family or friends. Forty-two percent of alumni reported that they discussed national politics and affairs nearly every day or every other day.

Volunteering to Work for a Candidate
Another time-honored form of political participation is volunteering to campaign for a candidate for political office. Since January 2000, the start of the last national election year, 16% of respondents had volunteered to assist a candidate running for national, state, or local office in a variety of campaigns across the political spectrum at all levels of government. Despite their comparatively low-income levels, 10% of alumni made some financial campaign contribution during the past five years. And since January 1999, 33% of alumni reported taking part in a protest, march, or demonstration on some national or local issue (excluding strikes). One alumna reported being active in protests against the IMF and World Bank. Another wrote, "I am very active in the community, do lots of anti-oppression work, anti-sweatshop work, anti-globalization work, service, etc."

In contrast, 3% of NES respondents attended political meetings, rallies, speeches, or dinners in support of a particular candidate. Only 3% worked for a political party or candidate, and 3% participated in a protest, march, or demonstration. [6]

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[6] A greater number of NES participants, 17% and 15%, had worked on a community issue or attended a meeting about an issue facing community or schools in the past year.

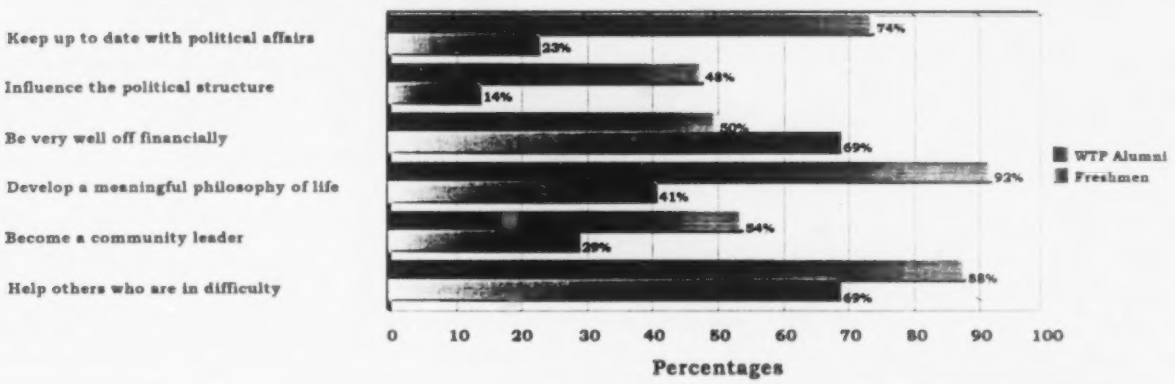
Contacting An Elected Official

When asked if they had contacted a federal elected official or staff (excluding contacts as a regular part of a job), 34% of alumni indicated they had done so. Email (20%) proved the most popular means of contact. A greater number, 37% of alumni, contacted elected officials or their staff at the state or local level. The NES respondents were asked whether they had telephoned, written a letter to, or visited a government official to express views on a public issue and 9% answered yes.[7]

Life Objectives

How committed to social activism is this emerging cohort? The *American Freshman* studies have asked a variety of these questions of incoming freshmen for the past 34 years.[8] The picture that emerges is that the values of alumni of the **We the People...** program are more conducive to active participation in a democratic society.

Objectives Considered to be Essential or Very Important



As reported earlier, nearly three-fourths of alumni feel it is essential or very important to keep up to date with political affairs. Less than one-third of incoming freshmen felt this way.

Substantiating their earlier reports of activism (conventional and unconventional), 48% of alumni held it essential or very important to influence the political structure. This is over three times the number of college freshmen who held this to be essential or very important. Alumni are also less materialistic than incoming freshmen. When asked how important it was to be very well off financially, 50% of alumni verses 69% of college freshmen consider this to be essential or very important. Nearly all, 92% of alumni versus 41% of freshmen, consider it important to develop a meaningful philosophy of life.

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[7] The NES might wish to include email as a means of contact as it appears to be a favorite among young people.

[8] Sax, Astin, Korn, and Mahoney (1999). *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1999*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA. Respondents compared with alumni are full-time first year students entering four-year colleges as freshmen in fall 1999. Questions are weighted to reflect national norms. Data are on p. 69.

Over half of alumni think it is important to become a community leader. In addition, 11% of alumni agreed that it was very essential or very important to run for office. In response to the question about how program participation affected the respondent's attitude toward politics, an alum responded, "I ran for mayor of Portland, Oregon last year (2000). I finished second out of seventeen candidates. I'm currently the Junior Class President at Pomona College." Another wrote, "I was student body president in high school, held several offices in college and am currently a Peace Corps Volunteer in Tanzania." Other alumni have served as interns in the White House, Congress, and in various state legislatures.

This brings us to our next point. Altruistic behavior is also esteemed higher by alumni than college freshmen. One student wrote, "I have been active in student government, the National Honor Society, and have volunteered for the American Red Cross and a nursing home." Alumni have volunteered for such diverse organizations as the Special Olympics, the Kids Voting program, the California Alzheimer's Chapter, and to work in libraries and churches.

Alumni report that their participation in the **We the People...** affected their course of study at the university. "I am thinking of majoring in political science because of **We the People**," or, "I chose political science as my major, and then went on to law school." Another wrote that she is "much more interested in political science courses, more confident in classes that require speaking and analytical writing." Others have majored in history, communications, and philosophy. Even those who have chosen to major in business or science maintain an interest in politics.

In conclusion, the picture that emerges is that **We the People**... program alumni are better prepared for the privileges and responsibilities of democratic citizenship than their peers. First, they are more interested in politics and public affairs. They watch news broadcasts and read the paper more often than their nonparticipating peers, and are thus better informed about politics and public affairs. Alumni discuss national politics more often than their peers. In summary, alumni are better informed.

In addition, they participate more in a broad range of political activities. Alumni work for political candidates at higher rates; they contact national and local representatives at higher rates; and they participate in public demonstrations to protest policies they object to at higher rates than their peers. Active citizenship is reflected in alumni values and life objectives. In contrast to college freshmen, alumni place a higher value on social activism, from influencing the political structure to becoming a community.

Perhaps most importantly in an era of declining voter turnout, 82% of alumni reported that they voted in November 2000. This is 34% higher than their peers, and is an encouraging finding. It comes at a time when voter turnout has declined (and declined most among the youngest Americans) and suggests that effective civic education may provide some remedy.

For additional information contact Suzanne Soule at (800) 350-4223 or soule@civiced.org.

Appendix 1

WEBBASED **We the People...** ALUMNI SURVEY
http://www.dynamicsurveys.com/alumni/

The following questionnaire has 31 short questions and takes about 10 minutes to fill out. The information you provide the Center for Civic Education is important, and will be shared with members of Congress, program coordinators, teachers, and others.

This survey is anonymous. By completing the questionnaire, you are eligible to receive a free copy of The United States Constitution and Other Essential Documents of American Democracy; however, you must provide your name and address at the end of the survey to receive this gift. Thank you for your participation.

1. Did you study the **We the People...**
   The Citizen and the Constitution curriculum? YES NO
   Please stop if your answer is NO.

2. Year that you participated in the program. 19_____

3. Your date of birth. 19_____

4. State where you went to high school. _____
   (List of choices to choose from.)

5. While studying **We the People...** did you participate in a simulated congressional hearing? *(Mark one)*

   Competitive Noncompetitive None

6. Indicate at which levels you participated in a simulated congressional hearing.
   (Check all that apply)

   School Congressional District State National Level

7. Were you registered to vote in the most recent presidential election?

   YES
   NO
   DON'T KNOW

8. We often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they weren't registered, they were sick, or they just didn't have time. How about you--did you vote in the elections this November?

YES, DID VOTE
NO, DID NOT VOTE
Not old enough to vote
DON'T KNOW

9. Think about the presidential elections since you turned 18. Have you voted in all of them, in most of them, in some of them, rarely voted in them, or have you never voted in a presidential election?

_____NEVER
_____RARELY
_____SOME
_____MOST
_____ALL
_____NOT OLD ENOUGH
_____NEVER ELIGIBLE
_____DON'T KNOW

10. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or other?

_____REPUBLICAN
_____DEMOCRAT
_____INDEPENDENT
_____OTHER
_____NO PREFERENCE
_____DON'T KNOW

11. How interested are you in national politics and national affairs?

_____NOT INTERESTED
_____SLIGHTLY INTERESTED
_____SOMEWHAT INTERESTED
_____VERY INTERESTED
_____DON'T KNOW

12. How often do you discuss national politics and national affairs with others?

_____NEVER
_____ONCE A MONTH
_____LESS THAN ONCE A WEEK
_____ONCE OR TWICE A WEEK
_____NEARLY EVERY DAY
_____EVERY DAY
_____DON'T KNOW

For questions 13-15, answer YES, NO or DON'T KNOW.

13. Since January 2000, the start of the last national election year, have you worked
as a volunteer -- that is, for no pay at all or for only a token amount -- for a candidate running for national, state, or local office?
14. Have you made a financial campaign contribution in the past five years?

15. In the time since January 1999, have you taken part in a protest, march, or demonstration on some national or local issue (other than a strike against your employer)?

16. In the past twelve months, have you initiated any contacts with a federal elected official or someone on the staff of such an official: someone in the White House, or someone in a congressional office? Do not count any contacts you have made as a regular part of your job.

Yes No If yes, please check all that apply
_____Email
_____Letter
_____Phone call
_____Visit
_____Other _____

17. What about an elected official on the state or local level -- a governor or mayor or a member of the state legislature or a city or town council -- or someone on the staff of such an elected official.

Yes No

18. How did participating in the **We the People…** affect your attitude toward politics and/or government?

_____
_____
_____

19. How important are the following objectives to you:

Essential Very Important Somewhat Important Not Important

a. Keeping up to date with political affairs.
b. Influencing the political structure.
c. Being well off financially.
d. Developing a meaningful philosophy of life.
e. Becoming a community leader.
f. Helping others who are in difficulty.
g. Becoming an elected official.

20. Please share information about yourself that would be interesting for the Center to know (ex. If you have participated in a campaign, volunteered, worked in public service, run for public office, been active in student government, etc.).

_____
_____
_____

21. How often do you watch national news broadcasts on television?

_____NONE
_____VERY LITTLE
_____SOME
_____A GREAT DEAL
_____DON'T KNOW

22. How often do you read a newspaper?

_____NONE
_____VERY LITTLE
_____SOME
_____A GREAT DEAL
_____DON'T KNOW

23. When you read the newspaper, how much attention do you pay to stories on national and world politics and public affairs?

_____NONE
_____VERY LITTLE
_____SOME
_____A GREAT DEAL
_____DON'T KNOW

24. When you use the internet, how much attention do you pay to websites that focus on national and world politics and public issues? (*Same response category as #23*)

_____NONE
_____VERY LITTLE
_____SOME
_____A GREAT DEAL
_____DON'T KNOW

25. What is your gender? Male ____ Female_____

26. Which category describes your racial background? *(Check all that apply)*

_____WHITE (CAUCASIAN)
_____BLACK or AFRICAN AMERICAN
_____ASIAN AMERICAN
_____ALASKAN NATIVE/NATIVE AMERICAN
_____HISPANIC/LATINO
_____OTHER (please specify)
_____DONT KNOW

27. If you are/were enrolled in a college or university, how did participating in **We the People…** influence your course of study?

_____
_____
_____

28. What is the highest degree that you have earned?

_____HS diploma
_____ASSOCIATE/JR COLLEGE DEGREE
_____BACHELOR'S DEGREE
_____MASTER'S DEGREE
_____DOCTORAL DEGREE
_____PROFESSIONAL DEGREE
_____OTHER

29. What kind of work (do you/did you) normally do? Check a category that best matches your work.

_____Student
_____Financial/Marketing
_____Technical
_____Health Field
_____Entertainment
_____Government
_____Education Field
_____Law Field
_____Nonprofit Sector
_____Manager
_____Administrator
_____Sales worker
_____Clerical worker
_____Skilled worker or
_____Craftsman
_____Machine operator
_____Laborer
_____Farmer
_____Farm Manager
_____Farm laborer
_____Service worker
_____Parent
_____Military
_____Other (please specify)

30. What is your job title: _____

31. How did your participation in the **We the People...** program affect your career choice?

_____
_____
_____

To suggest improvements for this survey or send us your comments, e-mail Jin Kim at kim@civiced.org
This study is being conducted for research purposes ONLY.